SANFORD TRAIN EXPLOSION - 1907

Explosion rocks Sandford

DISASTERS (W.U.)

JAN 12 1997

Historical Perspectives

By Mike McCormick
Special to the Tribune-Star

Before Saturday, Jan. 19, 1907, Sandford was a serene mining community on Vigo County's western edge.

At 8:50 p.m. that night, two freight trains — Extra No. 6575 eastbound and No. 99 westbound — were parked at the town's Big Four station as a westbound passenger train crept to a stop.

Suddenly, a resounding explosion — creating a nine-foot deep crater and shredding metal and bodies — destroyed the calm. Twisted rails, cars and body parts were dispersed over 200 yards from the blast site.

A stream of fire accompanying the boom illuminated the horizon for five seconds. Horrid screams pierced the darkness and a stench of burned flesh soon enveloped the area. Sandford's two physicians rushed to the scene, powerless to extricate victims trapped by the heavy wreckage.

When the shocking news reached Terre Haute, emergency rescue crews, journalists and families of the 65 passengers on Train No. 3, which had departed Union Station at 8:30 p.m., tried to reach the site.

Some hiked to Sandford along the railroad right-of-way. Others procured private handcars. The last train to St. Mary's Village, departing Terre Haute at 11 p.m., was crammed with anxious relatives obliged to walk the final four miles through mud and cold. The railroad provided at least one special train.

The area's leading newspapers, The Star and The Tribune, hastily published "extra" editions. The Tribune's three Sunday specials were issued at 1:30 a.m., 3 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. The Star's only "Extra" sold out within two hours.

Dawn yielded appalling scenes. A 12-year-old boy's mutilated body was hanging by his clothes from branches high in a tree 100 yards from the 700-foot-wide impact cavity. A small child's leg was retrieved from a pond. Three cremated skeletons were extracted from the mangle and four bloody torsos were located in a woods near the track.

Arms, legs, hair and fingers surfaced as massive search parties — and some crooks — sought jewelry and trinkets to identify the dead. Nearby houses were in ruins. Windows were shattered several miles away.

The rival newspapers presented several early casualty lists, estimating between 22 and 32 fatalities. The final "official" tally was 15. Vigo County's largest unnatural tragedy until the Jan. 3, 1963 Home Packing Co. explosion claimed 16 lives.

"The most ghastly tragedy in Indiana railroad annals," officials declared.

There were some variances in the published victim lists. All death rolls specified J.W. Southerland of Paris, Ill.; John Franklin, brakeman, Mattoon, Ill.; A.B. Hicks, Clarke W. Steele, Noah Wolfe and J.W.S. Miller of Sandford; Frank Fiedler of Bellefontaine, Ohio; John A. Bowen, Ashmore, Ill.; and H.W. Southcott, express manager, of Shelbyville, Ill. The concluding "definitive" log added William Davis, Perry (or Harry) Duck and James Denton of Sandford; and Dr. W.H. Haslett of Grandview, Ill. Two corpses were unidentified for several weeks.

Some itemized as deceased in early accounts, including Mr. and Mrs. Reed Wolfe and their two children; H. Blakely of Findlay, Ohio (whose body was taken to P.J. Ryan's morgue in Terre Haute); and the Kiever boy from Paris who was found in the tree, inexplicably were excluded from the last inventory.

Naming victims was not the only mystery associated with the Sandford disaster 90 years ago next Sunday. A more baffling puzzle was its cause.

Continued next week

SANDFORD

Explosion mystery unsolved

T-S JAN 19 1997

Sandford explosion, Part II

Historical Perspectives

By Mike McCormick
Special to the Tribune-Star

For several months, coroner's juries and the Indiana Railroad Commission vainly probed for answers to the tragic Jan. 19, 1907, explosion.

One train parked at the Sandford station included a sealed car with 500 gunpowder kegs produced by Equitable Powder Co. of Alton, Ill., yet investigating bodies concluded that nitroglycerine or dynamite activated the blast.

"Ordinary powder, of the sort they say was in the [freight] car, never would have dug a hole in the ground," Phil H. Penna, respected Indiana Bituminous Coal Operators' secretary, explained. "Powder, when it explodes, goes up, not down. The contrary is true regarding dynamite or nitroglycerine."

Inexplicably, no victim suffered powder burns though 500 kegs exploded. Atmospheric tests were not conducted but Rose Poly chemist John V. White discerned no dynamite or nitroglycerine traces either.

Robert E. Brown saw a fireball southwest of Sandford moments before sensing shock waves but no meteorite particles were located. The prospect that an errant spark invaded the powder car was rejected. A nearby gas line, inspected for leaks, also was eliminated as a cause.

Elmer Kelly found a spent dynamite stick at the site. The search also uncovered a black gunpowder can. Equitable Powder vowed that its cans were enameled green.

A handwritten note in a victim's pocket, reading: "To Minnie, 214 North 2nd Street, Terre Haute, Indiana," stimulated inquiry after The Tribune received and published an anonymous typewritten letter dated Jan. 24.

"I will not spin a yarn," the message began, "nor will I advance a theory but I will tell a tale — a plain, unvarnished tale — and those who read this letter may draw their own conclusions . . .

"Seven years ago there lived in the vicinity of Terre Haute a pretty young girl. In this story her name is Minnie Winters because . . . that isn't her name. In the same vicinity there lived two men — one we will name Jack Hastings, because that isn't his name, and the other we shall know as William Black, because that isn't his name . . ."

Winters and Black, both honor students, seemed destined for each other. Hastings, "slow and podding," was a "youth of great integrity" while Black was "full of deviltry."

After a peddler was beaten and died, suspect Black vanished from the area. Winters and Hastings eventually wed, "moving to a town near Terre Haute." Black reappeared five years later "sick at heart" over his school chums' bliss, "degenerating into the commonest kind of crook" — a box car tramp looting grocery stores — and "nursing a morbid desire for revenge on the man who married the girl he loved."

Ascertaining that Winters and her 4-year-old child were on an accommodation train, Black awaited, tossing a bomb under a parked rail car labeled "POWDER" as the excursion pulled into Sandford.

The letter ended abruptly, contending "the mystery of the Sandford wreck will never be cleared — unless — ."

Predictably, neither the author nor the disaster's origins were detected.

On the night of Feb. 21 to 22, Sandford Methodist Church, James Reece's Drug Store and the Shickel & Johnson general store were leveled by separate dynamite blasts. Saloonkeeper Henry F. McDonald promptly was arrested.

Never tied to the rail disaster, the impulsive McDonald nonetheless is distinguished in Vigo Circuit Court annals for slaying detective chief William Dwyer in the courtroom after a jury convicted him.

That, however, is the topic for a future column.

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